

SPIRITUAL INQUIRY IN THE CLASSROOM

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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The gospel lesson todayⁱ begins with Jesus teaching in the temple: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”ⁱⁱ Psalm 111, read earlier, exclaims, “Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.”ⁱⁱⁱ Here we are, in one of the greatest centers of teaching and study in the world. Is the teaching of Jesus heard only here in Memorial Church and through the various religious groups that have extracurricular operations on campus? Are the works of God studied only in these same contexts, with Religious Studies courses being the only formal classroom exception? What about the vast curriculum of this university and its almost 2000 faculty members? Is spiritual inquiry welcome in the academic classrooms of Stanford University?

For the last two years I’ve been a member of the Faculty Senate, and I had the opportunity to raise these questions in a presentation I did, followed by a questions and answers, in a faculty meeting last winter. I explained that a 2003 survey by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA^{iv} had found that 76% of students nationally say they are “searching for meaning and purpose in life” in college, while 56% say they have never been given the opportunity to discuss the meaning and purpose of life in any classroom setting. Hence, three-quarters of students want something that a majority of them never get from their professors. This is particularly surprising, I pointed out, since

liberal arts education has traditionally included character development, training for citizenship, helping students work out their personal values and ethics, and encouraging them to build a sense of what's ultimately important in life.^v

In the discussion period that followed, the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education lamented that certain students have been emotionally traumatized in the classroom by offhand comments by faculty that “utterly dismiss a spiritual life.” As he explained, “We cannot underestimate the wound that these comments can inflict upon a student in this developmentally intense period in their life.” The Dean of Humanities and Sciences asked if my office could provide training for faculty who want to develop more expertise in facilitating discussion of personal values and beliefs in their classrooms.^{vi}

These were very encouraging responses from rather high up in the academic hierarchy. Our work was cut out for us, though, by some other faculty members who raised questions about whether it's appropriate at all to explore students' spiritual and moral issues in the college classroom. That's exactly why we have chaplaincy programs, some said: to deal with this on an extracurricular basis. The chair of the Faculty Senate exclaimed “I'm a little nervous about talking about what should go on in the classroom, because I respect my colleagues and I think that they have their own visions of what should go on in the classroom. When we look around the world now, we see that under the aegis of religion and spirituality, ethical horrors are perpetrated every day. I just get nervous about whether we should move this way in the classroom.”^{vii}

One way to settle this question is simply to begin to look around and see what's actually going on in Stanford classrooms. There are in fact significant examples of spiritual inquiry going on in the academic environment right now. There are models to

be followed by faculty who are not yet engaged. I'd like to canvas several of those for you this morning and thereby let you know why I'm excited by what's happening these days at Stanford.

Perhaps it's obvious that such courses would be taught in Religious Studies. But let's take Professor Brent Sockness' course "The Problem of God" as one instance. He's personally a Lutheran Christian, but he explains that he addresses students' personal spirituality only "obliquely" in the classroom. The course is a "philosophical inquiry into the concept of God through its classic formulations, modern critics and contemporary defenders." Starting with the thirteenth century theologian Thomas Aquinas, working through philosophers Ludwig Feuerbach and David Hume, and ending with the contemporary theologian Gordon Kaufman, Professor Sockness insists on close reading and critical reflection on texts. He wants his students get deeply into the minds of each of these thinkers, in his own time and place, rather than have the classroom be a place for students to witness to their own beliefs. On the other hand, he understands that looking seriously at theological texts may lead to spiritual and moral transformation for his students.

He also believes that promoting religious literacy is a laudable goal in the college classroom, because our students are usually surprisingly uninformed, or misinformed, about their own religious traditions, much less anyone else's. If our students were better educated about religion as a human phenomenon, and about the great world religions, we would avoid many of the egregious mistakes that seem to be made daily in the public policy arena. That's part of what it means to have spiritual inquiry in the classroom from his perspective.

Philosophy seems to be another area where spiritual inquiry might naturally be addressed. Or maybe not, if philosophy is viewed as the secular cousin of religious studies. Debra Satz is a professor of Philosophy, who teaches courses in moral and political theory. She's also the director of an interdisciplinary honors program called "Ethics in Society." She privately identifies herself as a secular Jew. In her teaching, much like Professor Sockness, she wants students to take the writings of major philosophers seriously on their own ground, and occupy them from inside. Especially when students strongly reject a particular theorist, she pushes them to understand what would draw someone to see the world this way. The default as a student should be "I'm missing something here," rather than "This writer is an idiot." Before moving to an outside view and judgment, she wants to be sure the student has grasped the particular theorist's inside view. Then one can step outside and apply critical analysis to the theorist's position.

Religion can find its way explicitly into her classroom, as when talking about church-state relations in political theory, including spiritual bases for civil disobedience and the appropriate place for religious exemptions. Philosophers can specifically argue for the importance of religion, as when John Locke argues that being created in the image of God and imbued with inalienable rights is the basis for human equality. Empirical and naturalist explanations are not as compelling, because they tend to reveal how unequal human beings really are. Religion seems to back up a deep theory of equality, and hence Professor Satz makes sure that this is an important part of the classroom discussion about human equality.

Let's move to an academic discipline where spiritual inquiry in the academic classroom wouldn't be as obvious – history. Mark Mancall has been a professor of history at Stanford since 1965, and his primary area of academic expertise is south and southeast Asia. Personally Professor Mancall describes himself as a Jewish-Buddhist-Atheist. He feels that all people have a spiritual life, although we rarely explore it in higher education. It's his view that we need to work actively on integrating such exploration into the curriculum.

The way to do that for Professor Mancall is first to push students to question everything critically and actively -- so much that it keeps them awake at night. Students need to learn how to arrive at their own position without ever resorting to saying "That's what my parents taught me." Mark Mancall's job as a professor is to give his view of a text, because a text does not speak for itself, He has the authority of his training and experience in his area of expertise. He needs to be honest about what he knows and why. Then students have something to fight back against – a starting point or a backboard to begin developing their own perspective and their own values and beliefs.

Higher education at its best should be a matter of rigorous self-examination, for professors as much as for students. As an historical figure is studied, Professor Mancall feels that students should be encouraged to ask about this person's spiritual crises. How does this figure search for meaning and purpose? What are his or her questions? Then, one must ask as a student what one's own questions are – specifically in relation to what's being studied and not in the abstract.

It is also critical for universities to reclaim their founding missions, like Stanford's: "To promote the public welfare by exercising an influence in behalf of

humanity and civilization.” In the long run, Professor Mancall believes, if the institution has lost its spiritual and moral compass, its professors will not be able to point the way by themselves. The general cultural ethos of the institution is too strong, and that’s what students will learn more convincingly. If research is primarily directed by grant money and not by expanding knowledge and furthering the public good; if education simply furthers students’ self-interest and not the public interest; if the university compromises itself for the benefit of its donors and alumni; if university employees at the lowest level are not treated equitably and fairly – then all the professorial efforts in the world to help students find meaning and purpose in their lives will be overwhelmed by the primary lessons being taught by their university.

A final example of spiritual inquiry in the classroom is Professor Elizabeth Bernhardt’s course in German Studies entitled “Resistance Writings in Nazi Germany.” It concentrates on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor and theologian who was imprisoned and executed for his involvement in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. She explains that it’s impossible to read Bonhoeffer without going through some sort of personal transformation, and yet she doesn’t want to engage in anything approaching proselytizing in her class. She finds it “scary,” as she puts it, to deal openly with students’ values and beliefs – their moral and spiritual perspectives – having had no formal training herself in ethics or religious studies. Moreover, she was personally raised not to talk about these things in public. She’s always been a practicing Roman Catholic, but this is an intimate personal and family matter for her, rather than something to be exposing in her professorial life.

Nonetheless, she feels compelled by the material, and by her pedagogical duty to her college students in a liberal arts context, to help them struggle with their own values and beliefs in the classroom setting. In effect, she gives a consumer protection warning on the first day of class that she has three goals for her students: 1) To know what happened in Nazi Germany; 2) To commemorate and honor Bonhoeffer and others who stood up to Nazism; 3) To commit personally. That is, in terms of the third goal, she tells her students that it's not enough to admire some good people who faced evil; students must put what they learn into their own lives in some way and act on it. The third goal raises eyebrows for some students: "What do you mean that I'm supposed to do something with this course?" Yet, she's never lost a student on this basis, and most are very grateful for this goal by the end of the class.

It's been important to the success of the course that she has genuine diversity in the classroom. Usually this means a fairly equal split between committed Protestant Evangelical Christians, Jews, cultural Christians (both Catholic and Protestant) who no longer attend church, and secular students who have nothing to do with religion. The latter group are often "budding civil rights lawyers." She encourages – but does not require -- students to speak personally from their own experience as they engage with Bonhoeffer's writings. So, they come to know most of the others' religious backgrounds, or lack thereof.

She's been fascinated by some of the dynamics: Jews have said how much they like Evangelicals, because they seem nicer than other students and appear interested in them as Jews. But then it goes a step further, which surprises secular Jews. They are challenged by the Evangelicals to be real Jews, committed Jews: "Your culture has been

so at risk so recently and you don't even go to synagogue now?" Generally this has been taken positively by these Jews, who end up more deeply involved in their faith. Some of the Catholics and Protestants who have been only Christmas-and-Easter Christians end the course saying that they want to commit to going back to their churches and participating more fully, without buying everything the church is teaching. Non-religious students often speak of greater respect for religious people and describe how they have come to a clearer understanding of what's important in their own lives and how to engage themselves in careers and avocations that matter.

So there's a lot of spiritual inquiry going on in Stanford classrooms, and these are only four examples. In the psalmist's words, "Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them."^{viii} This is not to say that sermonizing or pastoral counseling or prayer is appropriate in the academic classroom. There's a distinct role for chaplaincy at Stanford and other colleges and universities. But we must remember that we all have a liberal arts obligation to help students find meaning and purpose in their adult lives. And, we have an obligation to society at large to graduate future leaders who, in the words of Stanford's founding grant, will "promote the public welfare by exercising an influence in behalf of humanity and civilization." That means they must be religiously literate and ethically sensitive, as well as highly skilled in critical reflection. They must be well launched on the project of coming to know themselves, as well as coming to know others through empathetic listening – being able to see the world through others' eyes as well as their own. Only then can we say that we are worthy inheritors and stewards of a liberal arts tradition which has always been concerned about the whole development of college-educated students and about the survival of civilization itself in a dangerous world.

NOTES

ⁱ Mark 1: 21-28.

ⁱⁱ Mark 1: 22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 111: 2.

^{iv} Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), *The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2003).

^v See, for example, Henry Rosovsky's *The University: An Owner's Manual* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990), p. 100, where he approaches a definition of liberal education by quoting from Howard Lee Nostrand's "Introduction" to his translation of Jose Ortega y Gasset's *Mission of the University* (1946): "General education means the whole development of an individual, apart from his occupational training. It includes the civilizing of his life purposes, the refining of his emotional reactions, and the maturing of his understanding about the nature of things according to the best knowledge of our time."

^{vi} "Faculty Senate Minutes – February 17, 2005 meeting," *Stanford Report* (February 23, 2005).

^{vii} *Ibid.*

^{viii} Psalm 111: 2.